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EPIC UNITY AS DISCUSSED BY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CRITICS IN ITALY

The ideas of the critical writers of the sixteenth century in Italy on the question of unity in the epic have never been tabulated, although the dramatic unities, first promulgated by these writers, have been discussed at length. It is the purpose of this article to give, in chronological order, the various theories on the subject of epic unity propounded by the critical writers in the half-century from Vida (1527) to Castelvetro (1570), a period in which the question was variously treated until it reached in Castelvetro its final development in the idea of the three unities.

Inasmuch as in such an investigation one cannot for a moment lose sight of Aristotle's dictum on this question of unity, it would seem advantageous to call to mind what he has to say. At the outset it should be understood that the unities are deduced primarily from the practice of tragedy and were applied only secondarily to the epic. This is particularly true of what little is said regarding the unities of time and place in the epic, but Aristotle discusses the whole subject of unity chiefly with regard to tragedy, and much of what his followers have repeated is written with an eye to the example of tragic unity.

In the *Poetics*, the question of unity receives a longer treatment than many of the other points discussed. By the rule of beauty a poetic creation must have at the same time unity and plurality. If it is too small the whole is perceived but not the parts; if too large the parts are perceived but not the whole. On this principle a whole such as the Trojan War is too vast in its compass even for epic treatment; it cannot be grasped by the mind and incurs the risk of becoming a series of detached incidents. The Platonic idea of an organism evidently underlies Aristotle's rules concerning unity. It is especially evident in one passage: "The construction of its stories should be like that in a drama; they should be based on a single action, one that is a complete whole in itself, with a

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beginning, middle, and end, so as to enable the work to produce its own proper pleasure, with all the organic unity of a living creature."¹

The unity of a plot does not consist in having one man as its subject; an infinity of things befalls that one man, some of which cannot be reduced to unity, and there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action. Homer, in writing the *Odyssey*, did not make the poem cover all that befell his hero, but he represented one action with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them would have interfered with the continuity of the whole. The epic, being in narrative form, may describe a number of simultaneous incidents, and these, if germane to the subject, increase the body of the poem without destroying its unity. The general law of unity laid down in the *Poetics* for an epic poem is almost the same as for tragedy, but the epic, being of wider compass, can admit many episodes which serve to fill in the pauses of the action, or to diversify the interest, or to embellish the narrative. The introduction of episodes, however, conduces to the result that there is less unity in the imitation of epic poets, inasmuch as from one epic many tragic plots may be derived. It is an evident fact, however, that if a single story were treated it would seem curt when briefly told, and thin and extenuated when prolonged to the usual epic length. On this point Professor Bywater translates Aristotle as follows: "In saying that there is less unity in an epic, I mean an epic made up of a plurality of actions, in the same way as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have such parts, each one of them in itself of some magnitude; yet the structure of the two Homeric poems is as perfect as can be, and the action in them as nearly as possible one action."²

In some inferior epics, although there is a certain unity in the story, it is not of the right kind, as the action consists of a plurality of parts, each of them easily detached from the rest of the work. Several tragedies may be made from a single epic of this type, whereas the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* does not supply materials for more than one or two. This emphatic assertion of the unity of action in the Homeric epic is not quite in harmony with statements made

¹ I. Bywater, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, Oxford, 1909, p. 71.

² Cf. Bywater, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

elsewhere in the *Poetics*. The story of the *Iliad*, for instance, is said to contain a plurality of actions.¹ This plurality of action is not, one can feel assured, condoned by Aristotle; on the contrary, to the extent that there is a plurality of action, to that same extent are the poems of Homer comparable to the "inferior epics."

Homer did not attempt to treat the Trojan War in its entirety—though it was a whole with a definite beginning and end—through a feeling apparently that it was too long a story to be grasped in one view, or, if not that, too complicated from the variety of incident. As it is, he has selected one section of the whole, bringing in many other matters as episodes, as, for example, the catalogue of the ships.

The only unity enjoined by Aristotle for the epic is the unity of action which we have just discussed. As everyone knows, the doctrine of the unity of time is based on one passage in the *Poetics* where Aristotle states that the epic is of greater length than tragedy, "which is due to its having no fixed limit of time, whereas tragedy endeavors to keep as far as possible within a single circuit of the sun."² As to the length of the epic, it must be possible for the beginning and the end of the work to be comprehended in one view, a condition which will be fulfilled if the poem is shorter than the old epics, and about as long as the series of tragedies offered for one hearing. Aristotle is here speaking merely of the material length of the epic, and not of any unity of time. He is referring to the real length of the work itself, a length measured by the number of lines a poem would take up in a book, or the number of hours required for recitation. Aristotle never loses sight of the obvious fact that the epic (the *Iliad*, for instance) extends its length to several thousand lines, whereas a tragedy rarely exceeds some sixteen hundred lines. This difference in length between the epic

¹ "One should also remember what has been said more than once, and not write a tragedy on an epic body of incident (i.e., with a plurality of stories in it) by attempting to dramatize, for instance, the entire body of the *Iliad*" (Bywater, chap. xviii, p. 53); and again (chap. xxvi): "We must remember that there is less unity in the imitation of epic poets, as is proved by the fact that any one work of theirs supplies matter for several tragedies. In saying that there is less unity in an epic, I mean an epic made up of a plurality of actions, in the same way as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have many such parts, each one of them in itself of some magnitude" (Bywater, p. 91).

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

and the tragedy is, for Aristotle, the natural consequence of another kind of difference, i.e., the fact that the action in a Greek tragedy is as a rule kept within a limit of some twenty-four hours, whereas that of the epic may extend over weeks, months, or years.

With this difference, therefore, in the extent of the action, in the quantum of matter to be included in the story, it is only natural that there should be a corresponding difference in the length of the external form in the two cases. Assuming this correspondence, Aristotle explains the great length of an epic compared with a tragedy, as due to the length of time over which the epic action extends. In other words, he passes from the idea of the actual length, the actual time required for the recitation, to that of the imaginary time covered by the action of the poem, apparently with the tacit assumption that the two things are so closely connected that the one may serve to explain the other. It would be absolutely wrong to deduce, however, that Aristotle is anywhere making the time of the actual recitation of the epic coincide with the time of presentation of a series of tragedies acted in a single day. The epic, then, must be a whole, but not too long a whole. This condition will be fulfilled if the epic is about the length of a trilogy, and thus considerably shorter than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. He evidently thinks that an epic on the old Homeric scale of length would prove too great a strain on the memory and attention of the literary public of his own time.

The discussion of unity may be divided into two main topics: the fundamental and basic idea that the plot should deal with one action—an Aristotelian precept which is generally denominated the "unity of action"; and, secondly, the so-called unity of time, derived by critics from the first, and bearing such an intimate relation to it that at times it becomes impossible to separate the two, although in this article an effort will be made to consider them singly. As a subdivision of the unity of action the question of the introduction of episodes will be treated. The word "episode" is used by the sixteenth-century critics in its literal meaning, that is, a "coming in besides," a digression or incident outside the plot or main action (generally called the *favola*) but related to it, and forming with the plot the whole narration or story.

Trissino, in treating the question of the unity of action, interprets Aristotle more broadly than many sixteenth-century critics. Although in his dedication to Charles V preceding the *Italia liberata* Trissino says that he intends to treat one and only one of the many actions of Justinian, he adds that he purposes to commence at the beginning of the war and finish at the end, or, in other words, he considers the entire war as a unit, the treatment of which, he thinks, finds complete justification in Aristotelian rules. It will be remembered, however, that Aristotle commends Homer for not attempting to deal with the Trojan War in its entirety, and adds that Homer had refrained from so doing through a feeling, apparently, that the story was of too great length to be grasped in one view. Trissino, although fully aware of Aristotle's dictum on this subject,¹ interprets this in such a way as to justify the selection of an entire war, provided that, by so doing, the poem still remain of ordinary length and be not too complicated by variety of incident, and provided that the beginning and the end can still be grasped in one view. The words of Aristotle seem, however, to be capable of the single inference that he considered any war as a subject too vast for a single poem.

Robortelli, in his commentary on Aristotle, repeats the latter's doctrine regarding the organism by saying that the epic embraces a single, perfect, and complete action, and that, if it be complete in every part like some animal, it is beautiful and affords pleasure. If an author constitutes many actions in the epic, he departs from its proper art, for it ought to be a single, simple action.² In apparent opposition to the latter statement, he asserts that a tragic action ought to be simple, but that the epic makes the nature of its action complicated.³ He undoubtedly has in mind, however, the introduction of episodes and not any complexity of the plot proper, for he maintains⁴ that the epic, which is legitimately increased by episodes, is longer than tragedy because it includes more episodes. He seems to use the word *actio* in the sense that Minturno employs the word *narratio* or story, as is more evident in the following passage:

¹ Trissino, "De arte poetica," in *Tutte le opere*, Verona, 1729, p. 113.

² Robortelli, *In librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes*, Florentiae, 1548, p. 320.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

"In the epic many parts of the action are completed at the same time; episodes are parts of the action, and each one has a perfect and complete action in itself,"¹ yet the epic as a whole seems to be a single action. Some, ignorant of the reason (*rationem*) and the art (*artificium*) of the heroic poem, have followed all the deeds of one man which were either accomplished at one time or in the space of many years. The action in such a poem is not one but becomes manifold (*multiplicem*) and diverse.² Such a poem is not to be condemned from the point of view of length of time, because, in his opinion, in its imitation the epic may legitimately embrace matters covering not only a day and night but many days, months, and years—a very flexible and elastic freedom when compared to the limits imposed by later critics, such as Minturno; it would be condemned only as offending the unity of action, the only unity Robortelli recognizes.

Bernardo Segni maintains that the plot is one and perfect when it relates a single action.³ In this way it can be said that the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* are a single action. "Let it not disturb us if in these poems many matters are found, because such things are episodes." But the action of each of these poems is a single action, he repeats. The episodes treat of things outside the action which the poet purposes to imitate, which, nevertheless, are not entirely separate from it but agree with it in some part. Following the ideas of Robortelli ("Rubertello," as he calls him), he makes the statement that the heroic poem imitates an action lasting several years.

In the work of Giraldi Cinthio defending the *romanzi* we find a far different idea concerning unity from that which we have met heretofore. The writer of the *romanzi* chooses a subject not of one action of one man but of "one or more illustrious actions of one or more excellent men."⁴ Ariosto and Boiardo, he believes, have fulfilled these conditions. The subject-matter of the *romanzi* is different from the works of Virgil and Homer because both of these have

¹ Robortelli, *In librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes*, Florentiae, 1548, p. 320.

² *Ibid.*, p. 271.

³ *Rettorica et Poetica d' Aristotile tradotte di Greco in lingua vulgare Fiorentina*, Firenze, 1549, p. 300.

⁴ G. Giraldi Cinthio, *Discorsi*, Vinegia, 1554, p. 8.

undertaken to imitate a single action of a single man, whereas Ariosto and Boiardo have imitated many actions not only of one man but of many.¹ "And although it appears that Aristotle blames in his *Poetics* those who wrote a *Theseid* or a *Heracleid*, he does not condemn them (if his words are well considered) on account of the composition or the subject, but because it appeared to these authors whom he blames that in writing the deeds of a single man they were making a poem of a single action, an opinion certainly far from true, and worthy of being blamed."²

"All the poetic compositions which contain deeds of heroes are not restricted within the bounds which Aristotle has imposed upon the poets who write poems of a single action."³ Giraldi contends that it is better to follow many actions than a single action, because it seems that this method is more adapted to the composition in the form of *romanzi*, for this diversity of action carries with it a variety which is delightful, and furnishes ample opportunity for the introduction of episodes or pleasing digressions and events which could never fittingly happen in that manner of poetry which describes a single action.⁴ Despite this greater freedom in choice of subject, he cautions the poet to keep in mind the harmonious arrangement of the matter. "And this disposition ought not to be alone considered in the principal parts, which are beginning, middle, and end, but in every smaller section of these parts."⁵ He adopts as an excellent simile that of the body, comparing it to a composition, as follows: "Just as a man's body is made of bones, nerves, flesh, and skin, so the compositions of good poets, who write *romanzi*, ought to have parts in the body of the poem which correspond to the parts of the human body."⁶ The sections should be joined to each other like parts of the body, though in a manner different from that of Homer and Virgil.

The writers of *romanzi*, having taken the actions of many from the beginning, have not been able to continue one matter from canto to canto, on account of the fact that all of them are intimately connected. But it has been necessary for them, after speaking of one of their characters, to pass to another, breaking off the narration

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

of the first and entering into the deeds of the other, and with this order to continue until the end, "a thing which they have done with marvelous art."¹ An especially interesting passage shows Giraldi's ideas regarding the nature of the episodes that may be treated. "There can be introduced into the compositions," he says, "loves, unexpected events, wrongs, vices, offenses, defences, deceits; deeds of courtesy, justice, liberality, virtue, treachery, faith, loyalty, etc., and such other episodes; and there can be introduced such variety and delight that the poem will become most pleasing."²

Giraldi does not believe that the story of a whole life would be a poor composition or lacking in pleasure or utility. "For we willingly read in prose the life of Themistocles, Coriolanus, or Romulus, and of other excellent men; why ought it to be less pleasing and less profitable to read it composed in verse by a noble and wise poet? For he knows how the lives of heroes ought to be written in verse for an example to the world, like history."³ As the Italian has its own forms of poetry different from those of other tongues and other countries, the Tuscan poet ought not to be confined by the limits within which the Greeks and the Latins were constrained but ought to proceed along the paths which the best Italian poets have indicated, with the same authority which the Greeks and Latins had in their language. "And this is the reason that I have many times smiled at those who have wished to place the writers of *romanzi* under the laws of art given by Aristotle and Horace, not considering the fact that neither one nor the other knew this tongue, nor this manner of composing."⁴ Giraldi, nevertheless, does not lightly cast aside the precepts of the ancients. "I do not say this, however, because I blame the precepts which are necessary to good composition, as are those which Aristotle, Cicero, and the other ancients gave."⁵

Pigna's ideas are somewhat similar to those of Giraldi, although it is interesting to see that there are differences between the two which one would not expect to find, in view of the fact that Pigna bewails loudly the appropriation of his ideas by his teacher. Pigna, too, contends that *romanzi* are different from the older epic, chiefly

¹ G. Giraldi Cinthio, *Discorsi*, Vinegia, 1554, p. 41.

² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

on account of the fact that where the Greek and Latin poets speak continuously the Italians interrupt the course of their poems from time to time.¹ He, too, although with less elaborateness, considers² the epic like an animal composed of substance and extraneous things (*accidenti*), the *accidenti* being the episodes which are digressions placed outside the principal action.³ As in a good composition the members will be proportionate, so in a poor one they will be prolonged where it is unnecessary.⁴ He recognizes, however, that the epic action is essentially one action of one person.⁵ He differs from Giraldi in saying that, although the *romanzi* are adapted to depict many deeds of many men, they devote themselves especially to one man who is celebrated above all the others, and thus they agree with the epics in depicting a single person. But this is not the case, he adds, when it is a question of taking a single fact, because the writers of *romanzi* treat as many actions as they deem suitable, nor do the *romanzi* agree with the epics in making one action supreme and the others subordinate.⁶ Furthermore, Pigna, in direct opposition to the statement of Giraldi Cinthio, asserts that Aristotle has been the guide in *romanzi*, although he did not speak of them.⁷ He contends also that Ariosto followed classic models. "And although the love of Angelica could have been treated differently, nevertheless it was related in this manner following the example of the *Iliad*."⁸ "And to show that he has followed the Greek and Latin poets equally, he took care to begin his poem with the lines of the *Iliad* and to conclude it according to the form of the *Aeneid*."⁹

Bernardo Tasso, writing to Benedetto Varchi under date of March 6, 1559,¹⁰ reduces the whole question to the consideration of the effect produced. "If Aristotle were born in this age and should see the most pleasing poem of Ariosto's, knowing the force of custom and realizing that it furnishes so much delight, I do not know whether he would change his opinion and consent that a heroic poem could

¹ G. Battista Pigna, *I Romanzi*, Vinegia, 1554, p. 14.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 42. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9. ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25. ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65. "Et come in tutto il Duello non mai da lui veduto, lume ne diede esso Aristotele, così quivi ne Romanzi è stato la nostra guida, benchè egli mai non ne parlasse."

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁰ Cf. Porcacchi, *Lettere di XIII huomini illustrij*, Venetia, 1576, pp. 444 ff.

be made of many actions, giving it new rules and prescribing for it new laws with his wonderful learning and judgment."

Capriano, disagreeing with Aristotle when he gives precedence to tragedy, declares that the fact that the epic includes an action of many years does not cause it to have less unity or to be less pleasing.¹

Minturno, in the *De Poeta*, repeats the Aristotelian precept that the epic plot should be one, complete, and perfect, and that the beginning, middle, and end should be in accord.² Like Robortelli and Giralaldi, he uses the illustration of the organism. "Is not the human body complete and one? But its parts are head, arms, hands, legs, and feet, which by themselves are complete and one."³ Therefore when a heroic poem is occupied with one action the plot will be one; and, because it will be protracted to a great length, it is customary for such a poem to embrace events from which many dramatic plots can be formed. Although the heroic narrative is permitted to include many things, it ought not, however, to be so prolonged that it seems overburdened, nor of such length that it cannot be completely grasped.⁴ Minturno does not share the opinion of such writers as Segni, Madius, and Capriano. Although declaring that the plot will be one if the action is one, he continues saying that if a writer observe the poems of the ancients he will discover that epic actions are perfect if within the period of one year.⁵

Vettori contends that Aristotle teaches that one epic can be rightly prolonged to the same time limit that is required for the representation of a number of tragedies, "so that if the spectators remain in the theatre for the space of eight hours paying attention to many tragedies which are portrayed, to that same space of time the epic may be prolonged, for it may be supposed that men would hear with pleasure an epic poem recited for the same number of hours."⁶ He admonishes epic writers, therefore, that they should not give the epic a larger body than would be that of all those tragedies which are produced in one day, for although epic poems

¹ Capriano, *Della vera poetica*, Vinegia, 1555, chap. iv.

² *De Poeta*, Venetiis, 1555, p. 147.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁶ P. Victorius (Vettori), *Commentarii in primum librum Aristotelis de arte poetarum*, Florentiae, 1560, p. 250.

were not recited in the theater in the same manner as tragedy, yet, if they were read aloud, the recitation or reading of the epic poem would consume the same amount of time as that occupied in the action of the tragic plot, an idea which was later attacked by Castelvetro. Vettori observes that when Aristotle asserts that the epic is extended to its proper length by means of episodes, he means that without episodes the epic would be insignificant, or, in other words, he wishes to signify that the length which is perceived in every epic work is contributed by the episodes and is not part of the argument; "for some ignorant person who could not distinguish episodes from the argument of the poem thought that this prolixity arose from the argument."¹ Vettori is merely corroborating the assertions of Segni, Giraldi, and others regarding the true nature and use of the episodes.

Scaliger seems to lay himself open to the criticism of Vettori as being one of the *imperiti* who fail to distinguish episodes from the argument where he says that, inasmuch as several plots can be extracted from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, they cease to be a complete organism with one plot. "Finally Aristotle laughs at those who think that either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* is a complete organism with one plot, for he says that one may draw several plots from either one, because there are many parts and many episodes. So it was that the ancients used to recite certain portions taken from the whole body, as, for instance, the battle and catalogue of the ships, the summoning of the spirits, those things which happened on Circe's island, etc."²

One should certainly not be overhasty in condemning Scaliger as *imperitus*, but he is unquestionably open to the criticism of failing to state his thought clearly, and of failing to define his terms. When Aristotle says that several plots can be composed from the poems of Homer he means tragic plots and not epic plots (Scaliger implies the latter meaning by his use of the word *fabulas*) and consequently Aristotle does not "laugh at those who think that the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* is a complete organism with one plot." It will be recalled that what Aristotle really said was that "the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have many parts, each one of them in itself of some magnitude; yet

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

² J. C. Scaliger, *Poetices*, MDXCIV, lib. i, cap. v.

the structure of the two Homeric poems is as perfect as can be, and the action in them as nearly as possible one action,"¹ and Aristotle recommends that they be accepted as models in so far as they are one organism with one plot. Scaliger, however, recognizes the need of unity when he subscribes to the Aristotelian idea of the organism. The author should divide his book into chapters, "all so related that they constitute an organic body."

Inasmuch as Trissino's *Arte poetica* is little more than a paraphrase of Aristotle, we find almost all the precepts of the Stagirite repeated with only slight variation. In the fifth division, appearing in 1563, for instance,² Trissino says that care must be taken in forming the plot, that it be one, complete, and great; and this "one" does not mean that it includes all the deeds of a single man, a matter in which many are deceived. Trissino gives as an example of this idea of unity the *Decameron* of Boccaccio, thus interpreting in its broadest significance the idea of Aristotle that the plot should be based on a single action, so as to enable the work to produce its own pleasure. It is not many actions of one man, but a unity resulting from the concerted action of many.

Minturno, in *l'Arte poetica*, contends that the *romanzi* are not the poetry which Aristotle and Horace taught.³ There are those, he continues, who confess that the *romanzi* do not conform to the form and rule which Homer and Virgil followed, and yet obstinately defend this error, saying that because such compositions treat of the deeds of wandering knights they need not conform to Aristotelian laws but require the inclusion of diverse matters. The heroic poem imitates one memorable, perfect deed of one illustrious person; the *romanzi* have for their object the assembling of knights and ladies, and the treatment of matters of war and of peace. The *romanzi* describe diverse countries and various things which happened in all the time which the story covers. Homer, he agrees, did the same thing to a certain extent, but everything he described had its origin from one beginning and was directed to one end. This is not the case in the *romanzi*.⁴ However, he contends that Ariosto could have

¹ Cf. Bywater, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

² Cf. Trissino, *Tutte le opere*, Verona, 1729, p. 97.

³ *L'arte poetica*, Napoli, MDCCXXV, p. 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

adhered to the same law of unity by treating the same subject-matter in a different way. If Ariosto was not content to treat only the affairs of Ruggiero as the most excellent of all knights, he should have composed another story devoted only to his deeds, just as Homer had done, who praised Achilles in the *Iliad* and Ulysses in the *Odyssey*. He would not then have pretended in the title that he was writing of Orlando, and then in reality have described the deeds of another as the principal character, nor would he have assembled a great mass of persons and things such that a whole poem would be required to describe some of them. Minturno does not say this to detract from the worth of Ariosto as a poet but rather to excuse him for not knowing better than to follow the abuses of the *romanzi* to please the many.¹ The writers of *romanzi* interrupt frequently the course of the poem, going from one part to another, and taking up the thread again where they left off. The interruption of the narrative, contends Minturno, interferes with the enjoyment of the reader; the interest is aroused by many incidents contributing to the same end.

As a perfect and well-formed animal causes delight, so is the plot sufficiently complete which can cause pleasure to the minds of others.² It is manifest that Virgil and Homer have undertaken to treat a complete and perfect matter concerning things which happened only within a year. Homer treats in the *Iliad* that which happened in the tenth year of the Trojan War; in the *Odyssey*, the return of Ulysses to Ithaca. These authors treat many things which are not part of the plot, but parts outside of it; it is necessary, however, that they be so connected that, although they can be separated from it without detriment to it, nevertheless they should appear to be derived from it and to be directed to the same end.³ "But, although it has this prerogative of being able to increase its length so much, the subject-matter of the plot cannot deal with things which happened in a longer space than a year."⁴

For Castelvetro the dramatic unity of action is only a consequence of the unities of time and place, and hence subordinate to them; and since, as we shall see later, he is not inclined to restrict

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

the epic as to time and place, so the Aristotelian unity of action is of relatively little importance to him. He has, in fact, a very broad and inclusive idea of the unity of action as applied to the epic. He repeats the Aristotelian precept that the plot should be one and contain a single action of one person, but he follows this statement with the assertion that the epic plot can relate not only one but many actions.¹ The epic, then, can have a great number of actions. The question to be determined, consequently, is the meaning which Castelvetro gives to the word "action." Is he here making "action" synonymous with "plot" as he does elsewhere,² or is he speaking literally of the deeds of the personages which will be included in one plot, as he does in another passage?³ The latter interpretation seems to accord more with the general statement of his principles. He contends, for example, that there are numerous ways of uniting many different actions and of making them become one action and one body, as for instance, the method of adhering to a limited time or place, reputed many actions one because they happen at the same time or in the same place.⁴ The mere fact that the actions occur at the same time, however, is not sufficient, for coincidence of actions does not necessarily entail any interrelationship of events. Those epic poets err who write of actions which happened at one time to one person or more, when there is no interdependence in the happenings.⁵ One can be reasonably sure, then, that when Castelvetro joins the words "plot" and "action" he means the main action, just as we speak of it, and elsewhere he desires to signify the deeds of the personages.

He repeats the idea already expressed by Robortelli, Giraldi, and Vettori, that beginning, middle, and end can first be considered in a large whole, and can then be considered in some part of that whole, as if that part were another whole somewhat smaller.⁶ The

¹ Castelvetro, *Poetica d'Aristotele*, Basilea, MDLXXVI, p. 179.

² "Ma ci dobbiamo ricordare . . . che non si può far tragedia che sia lodevole, la quale non habbia due attioni, ciò è, due favole, quantunque l'una sia principale, l'altra accessoria" (p. 692); and again, "Se le cose immaginate sono più, le immagini debbano essere più, e per conseguente, che la favola, la quale è imagine dell'attione, sia uno, o più, secondo che l'attione è uno, o più."

³ "Non ha dubbio niuno, che, se nell' historia si narra sotto un raccontamento più attioni d'una persona sola . . . nella poesia si potrà sotto una favola narrare senza biasimo più attioni d'una persona sola." Cf. p. 178.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 511.

Trojan War, which lasted ten years, would be considered a perfect action, and the wrath of Achilles, which is a part of the aforesaid war, considered by itself, would be regarded as another perfect action. The explanation of the matter lies in the fact that for Castelvetro the unity of action is not the result of any necessity but is merely the effect of the desire on the part of the author to show greater excellence.¹ He contends that Homer did not adopt the unity of action as a result of the restriction in time and place, but that the real reason for the adherence to such a unity was that Homer considered the singularity of action more beautiful.² Castelvetro declares, and with more than mild disapproval, that Aristotle can adduce no other reason or proof than the example of the tragic poets and of Homer for this singularity of action. Such examples, apparently, are not convincing to Castelvetro. What is more, he proceeds to expound his theories of this broader unity of action in direct opposition to the teaching of Aristotle. He opposes absolutely the views of the Stagirite. "If we believe the words of Aristotle"—and there is a strong implication that Castelvetro does not—"we should have to blame Vida who composed the *Cristiade*, in which are related many miraculous actions of Christ, because like those poets blamed by Aristotle he narrated many actions of one person. And furthermore (that is, if we believe the words of Aristotle), we should not be able to commend as a well-constructed plot that of the *Iliad* of Homer, for, although it contains a single action (or rather a part of an action, according to Aristotle, that is, a part of the Trojan War) it is not an action of a single person but of a people, because that war was made by common consent of the chiefs of the Greeks." "And so much the less should we be able to consider" (that is, if we believe the words of Aristotle) as a well-constructed plot that which not only contains many actions of one person, or one action of many persons, but also many actions of many persons."³ All this Castelvetro considers not only possible but proper to include in the epic plot. He sees in the practice and method of historians the example and justification of a similar procedure by the poets, inasmuch as for him poetry is an imitation of history—*rassomiglianza d'istoria*. If in history, he maintains,⁴

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 179 and 504.² *Ibid.*, p. 179.³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.⁴ *Ibid.*

one can narrate many actions of a single person, as Plutarch, Suetonius, and others have done, there is no doubt that one can narrate in poetry a single action of a whole people. After thus enlarging the number of the personages to include a whole nation engaged in one action, it is but a step for Castelvetro to justify the inclusion of the many actions of a people such as those treated by Livy and other historians. And if one concede as permissible many actions of one people, it is readily recognized that many actions of many people can be admitted into the narration of the heroic poem.¹ Such, then, is the latitude with which Castelvetro treats the unity of action.

But just as we shall see in his treatment of the unities of time and place, Castelvetro the radical becomes Castelvetro the conservative by the added assertion that, after all, the poet displays in a marked manner his judgment and industry when he treats a plot comprising but a single action of a single person (a plot, that is, which at first sight would not appear capable of causing pleasure to the hearers) in such a way that he causes the readers as much delight as other poets can scarcely cause with many actions of many persons.² And although he would permit unusual freedom in the unity of action, his basic belief is summarized in the words already cited: "The epic ought to comprise one action of one person, not from necessity, but for a demonstration of the excellence of the poet."³ It will be seen that he admits into the legitimate domain of the epic the *romanzi* of which Giraldis, Pigna, and Minturno had constituted a genre apart, although he did not entirely countenance the "improper digressions" in the *Orlando Furioso*.⁴

Castelvetro deduced the dramatic unities of time and place from the practice and the theory of the tragedy, and their application to the epic is of secondary importance to him. Just as we have seen that he treats in a broad way the unity of action, so does he assert, regarding the unity of time, that the time of the action of the epic is not determined, because the epic, narrating with words alone, can relate an action which happened during the course of many years and in diverse places, since the words may present to our minds

¹ Castelvetro, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

things distant in time and place.¹ The epic, then, not having to conform to the restricted limits of time and place, like tragedy, can relate an action which happened in many years, not in many days only, and in places far distant, not in one place only.

Castelvetro does not agree with the commentators such as Vettori, who believe, first, that Aristotle meant that the reading or recitation (*constitutione*) of the epic should last as long as the presentation of several tragedies, which are recited one after another in one day; and secondly, that the epic should not be so long that it cannot be read in a day. Although Aristotle had placed the discussion of the length of the presentation of tragedy outside the theory of poetry, Castelvetro includes the question in his treatise, and, identifying the time of the presentation with the time of the action of the tragedy, disagrees with the first rule regarding the epic, because many tragedies naturally ought not to be capable of being recited in one day, one after another, according to his idea, for each tragedy has its limits conformable to one turn of the sun. How then, he asks, if each tragedy occupies a whole day, can several be recited in one day, one after the other?

Regarding the second rule, Castelvetro asks: "If the epic ought not to exceed one day in reading, according to Aristotle, where would be the divinity of Homer (who is so much admired by him), who has made two epic poems, neither of which could be read even in a few days"?² Regarding these two points Castelvetro denies, then, that the length of the epic should be equal to the number of tragedies read in a day, and that the length of the epic is in reality restricted to one day. He ascribes to the poem a length conformable to the natural needs of the audience, and concludes that the epic cannot be extended to such a length that it would be unreasonable to recite it to the people at one time, that is, in as many hours as the people could listen in comfort. Therefore the long epics are divided into such lengths as are *verisimile*, so that the author may comfortably recite and the auditors listen to him at a single time.

Castelvetro cannot believe that Homer would have committed such an error as to continue twenty-four books without any division,

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

² *Ibid.*, p. 532.

reciting all of them at one time. The epic can divide its narration into many books, which nevertheless do not contain more than one action, and can recite one book per day without occasioning any great difficulty in following the story.¹ Despite this great freedom in the unity of time, concludes Castelvetro (and this statement is significant), the more the time of the action in the epic will be restricted, the more praiseworthy it will be. The same is true of the unity of place. The epic is not limited as regards place, for its action can take place in heaven or hell, on land or sea, or in the air. "Nevertheless, in the epic also, the more the place is restricted, the more it is commendable and the more does the epic succeed."²

But Castelvetro, in spite of the singular breadth of vision which we have noted, does not entirely escape from the tendency of the typical sixteenth-century critic to impose rigorous restrictions on the forms of literature. While apparently allowing extreme liberty, he qualifies his assertions. The unity of action is not imperative, but the poet who desires to show his excellence will strive for it; the unity of time is not necessary, yet the more the time of the action in the epic is restricted, the more praiseworthy it will be. There are no limits regarding the place in which the epic action may occur, yet the more limited the place, the more is the poem to be commended.

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¹ Castelvetro, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

² *Ibid.*, p. 535.